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Subject: Broken Blossoms

There are three aspects of Lesage's essay that I particularly appreciated: 1) She points to the ways in which various figures of Otherness are often employed in the advancement of an other Other's position, 2) She recognizes the privilege required to choose the position of outsider, and links this to limited social roles defined under capitalism, 3) She bravely confronts the difficult negotiations required between feelings of seduction and pleasure, and more analytical critique.

1) Women's increasingly independent public presence in the 20th century is a constant threat to the public/private distinction established along lines of gender. The "illicit ecstasy" of "mannishly dressed women in sexually active poses or in compositions of sexual-self sufficiency or dominance," is crucially mediated by its association, "with a man of another race." (p. 252) By linking the transgression of traditional feminine roles with the figure of an other Other, the film simultaneously depicts and denies the possibility of one kind of feminist resistance. This ability, to both, "allow for and co-opt an oppressed group's response," (p. 247) to, "offer a clear erotic message, a message that is then ambiguously denied," (p. 256) is crucial for the production of what Lesage later describes as her contradictory response (both identification and critique) to the film.

2) I love this quote: "I think we should ask why this figure is characteristically male and what his social role is. In fact, the romantic hero and the sensitive outsider (or, to use a more familiar equivalent, the filmmaker and the professors of literature and film) have a specific class position under capitalism; their chance to CHOOSE that position is the escape valve that capitalism allows for dissatisfied male members of its petite bourgeoisie." (259) Lesage's recognition of the privilege of the academic to choose is reminiscent of Dyer's point concerning the privilege enjoyed by whiteness to transgress without threat. In other words, the transgression of the romantic hero/academic is appreciated as style, while that of the less privileged requires repression for its greater potential for disruption of the dominant order.

3) "It is difficult to move away from 'feeling' to a more active, self-aware response." This is an important and under-acknowledged aspect of critical practice. It reveals that something more than analytical critique is necessary in the production of a resistant practice. For often such critique fails to attend to the basis of ideological power, its ability to seduce through what Williams (I think it's Williams) calls "structures of feeling".

I had my own experience of this kind of confrontation between critique and experience last night. After going to see "The Diary of Bridget Jones" with my girlfriend, I asked her what she thought of the movie. She said that she recognized the story as the same old story of a woman obsessed with obtaining the status of wife, but identified with the main character's fears of living her life alone, and her desire to find a partner to love. When I went into my pretentious critique of the protagonist's self-subjection to the oppressive role of wife (as opposed to seeking independence through career, as the central male characters do), my girlfriend asked: "but what's wrong with wanting a partner for your life?" My abrupt dismissal of the entire text as regressive was tempered by my girlfriend's insight that, despite the very limited scope of Bridget's ambition, her situation and anxieties offered very real points of identification, with deep emotional resonance, for the female viewer. That the film focuses exclusively on this identification is a valid critique, but to dismiss this power and emotional resonance as simply ideologically misguided is too obtuse a reading.

> Dear all:

I have some thoughts about Lesage's article which I want to share (I'll try to be brief).

Lesage mentions that the problem of race is not profoundly dealt with in this movie, but I thought differently as an amateur historian.

In the year of 1919 when the film came out, Americans and Europeans already had a plenty of violent experience with Asians in the far East. I'll just name two major ones.

1) 1900: Chinese peasant uprising (known as Boxer Uprising) in which westerners and Christians were mercilessly slain.

2) 1904-5: Russo-Japanese war, in which gigantic Russia was defeated by small Japan

Never in history had East Asian countries come into an intensive and often bloody contact with the west in the beginning of the 20th C. Would it not be comforting for a western man of that time, especially a patriarchic southerner like Griffith, to project Asian men as peace-loving, aesthetic and daydreaming than to face millions of Chinese peasants with anti-western sentiment?

p.s. If you guys have time tomorrow evening at 8:00pm, please come to see the Asian Showcase at the Film Center, Art Institute (410 S. Columbus Dr.) I played a small role in one of the short films. I heard there are plenty of movies that deal with race, gender, etc.

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To what are we to give primacy in the film text: the composed image or the specifically worded intertitle? It is interesting that this debate has historically occurred between sound and image, and the visual typically wins. But in this instance, both conflicting elements are visual. Lesage clearly defers to Griffith's direction and mise-en-scene, and she may be correct in doing so. However, the notion that the inclusion of a seemingly contradictory intertitle only strengthens the potency of the visual images seems dubious, especially at this historical moment.

One of the primary motivations for the introduction of intertitles was to remove the obligation, or rather the ability, of motion picture exhibitors to clarify or even alter the meanings of films. This placed more of the power in the hands of the production companies, and was a move toward the consolidation and standardization of the motion picture industry. With this in mind, it seems plausible to believe that there is just as much intentionality and meaning behind the intertitles as there is behind the image. Furthermore, while the perceived immorality of the motion picture industry had historically been a source of concern, at this time there was no formal institution, such as the Production Code, charged with closely governing decency in Hollywood films. If such an organization had been in place, it might be reasonable to assume that Griffith was merely covering himself as a filmmaker, assuming that primacy would be given to the clearly and directly articulated message, rather than the subjective interpretation of a scene's visual composition.

But if we reject this last theory, what can we make of this specific intertitle? It is interesting in relation to a discussion of ideology, as it raises so many questions, especially if it is considered in light of notions of encoding and decoding and authorial intent. But it is also worth considering in terms of what is traditionally called "revolutionary cinema." Traditionally such films are made outside of the mainstream industry by people from backgrounds that are typically considered to be marginalized. Clearly, D.W. Griffith fits neither category. But inasmuch as he was attempting to convey a very specific and potentially controversial or unpopular message--namely one of anti-racism in light of Birth of a Nation--is it not possible to read this intertitle as being in line with the often didactic, but in no sense less than legitimate, facetious or ironic, style of such revolutionary works?

Hi everyone,

Lesage's piece struck me for several reasons, but in particular I was glad to see someone writing about pleasure. I don't know how common this practice is in film studies, but in literary studies, to speak about one's reaction to a work--or to talk about reception in an affective way--is almost always considered a critical indiscretion. Barthes' "Pleasure of the Text" seems to be an exception, although as M.H. Abrams has noted, this is a singular type of dehumanized pleasure that obtains not in the interaction of human agents but "from the text-as-such." More generally, to screw with Lesage's terminology a bit, critics who talk about pleasure are regarded as (insensitive) outsiders. Harold Bloom comes to mind.

It may not be vogue to talk about enjoyment because to do so pushes one dangerously close to conceptions of the aesthetic, which, according to the most extreme definitions, transcends the bounds of history and the limitations of one's subject position. If pleasure is collapsed into this notion, it is not difficult to understand why historically-minded critics would be opposed to this type of discussion.

However, as Lesage adroitly suggests, analyses of pleasure need not be apolitical. Is the Ninth Symphony a beautiful piece of music? Yes it is. Did the Nazis sometimes use it to rile up the volk? Yes they did. The complex interconnections

between ideology and pleasure are undeniable, and insofar as they inhere in everyday life, they are real and deserve our critical attention.

But too (as Lesage also adroitly suggests, and as Mark Cousins kind of notes in "Hollywood is Right"), in the most ostensibly overt "anti-ideological" texts ("Broken Blossoms" is an example, but we might think also of texts like "American History X" or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" or "Thelma and Louise"), the manipulation/co-optation of an audience's projected reactions can be utilized to sort of bypass less-palatable aspects of a film.

With these notes in mind, I have a lot of questions, but I'm only going to ask four:

1. I was struck by the overtly racist depictions in this "anti-racist" movie. However, as Lesage notes, its critique of capitalism and depiction of familial relations and the place of women under capitalism is a pointed one. I guess I would ask, To what extent are we willing to accept one critical position if, in order to effect this stance, it must "ally itself" with another questionable representation? (Again, see "Uncle Tom's Cabin.")
2. Like Michael I also liked the outsider/academician analogy from page 259. Lesage seems in many ways to be particularly aware of the critical position from which she speaks. That said, why does she devote so little time to historicizing this film, and in particular, how a 1919 viewer would engage "Broken Blossoms" in comparison with someone (like me) watching it today? For instance, squint as he might, Barthelmess is clearly not Chinese. What did it mean to an audience to see a white guy playing "the yellow man" in 1919? Would they have even connected (as I did) Gish's pushing up the sides of her mouth to effect a smile with the way little kids (and alas, some adults) pull at the sides of their eyes to imitate Asians?
3. Lesage suggests that capitalism offers men two choices: to be an insider (boss/worker) or to be an outsider (drifter/romantic). This is fine, and I agree, although the way I read things Lesage seemed to attribute this limitation of choices to capitalism specifically. On the contrary, I would ask, how is this dualistic "imperative" different from the work any other ideology does?
4. One of the things I noted while watching "Broken Blossoms" this afternoon was the pervasiveness of smoke in this film. From the incense burning to the river mist to the manifold examples of characters smoking opium, cigarettes, and cigars to the smoke that envelopes Barthelmess when he fires the gun at the end of the picture, to subtitle the film "a study in smoke" would not, I think, be inappropriate. My question is for you experienced film students. Having noted a specific trope (like smoke) in a film, how should a film critic go about talking about it, and how could one connect the repeated image to more ideological considerations?

Lesage's far ranging, ideological, psychological and feminist analysis of Broken Blossoms contrasts greatly with other reviews such as Roger Ebert's or Rick Decroix's review. Ebert call's Gish one of the "great vulnerable screamers of the silent era." He also claims the film helped "nudge the nation from xenophobia" although he acknowledges it might "seem" racist. "Lesage is less of an opologist for Griffiths; she begins by calling the film sexist and racist by including it in a discussion of sexist and racist films which continue to engage women viewers. Throughout the article she returns to a questioning of her own interest in the film, identification with the characters and emotional involvement with the plot. At times she appears to be self critical for her relationship to the film, as if she should reject, for instance, the maternal urges that Gish's portrayal of the young tragic heroine Lucy, evokes in her.

This insertion of the personal is a feminist type of intervention, which is absent from other reviews of the film, and generally from film "reviews" or even analyses. It is interesting to consider how historical location changes the film's reception. While Lesage believes it is both sexist and racist she acknowledges that in its time it was "perceived as a sensitive and humanitarian" film. Is it OK to later label something as sexist and racist? What if the film merely "represents" actuality, the mores of its time. I am in favor of Lesage's critique here, I think if a film reflects a racist society than it can be labeled racist, but what if the film is attempting a critique of its racist society? Clearly the film evokes stereotypes, its "hyper feminized" portrayal of Bathelmess displays some ways that to our eyes the critique is flawed. Naturally, knowing Griffith's history and his potential desire to right his previous wrongs with Birth of a Nation, we're also perhaps more likely to label BB racist than if someone else, known for better intentions, made this film.

Another move that Lesage makes that is drastically different from other critiques of Broken Blossoms is to locate the sexual nature of Lucy's assaults by her father, and the sexual nature of her murder. As Lesage says "few have looked closely at the sexual perversity of this film." In family violence and murder, in the context of psychoanalysis almost has to have a sexual

connotation, although I wonder about Lesage's assignment of the phallus to the whip, certainly the bed and perhaps more importantly the absence of the mother and the "little wife:" scenario of the father daughter relationship, make her reading of incest seem plausible,. Certainly this interpretation seems unthinkable not a to at least consider.

Lesage comes back to herself in her discussion "A Woman Viewer's response "Lucy's pathos draw me into identifying with a cinematic depiction of woman as victim. "

She addresses how it "reflects my own internalized and eroticised fears of male authority, dominance and control-fears that derive from my girlhood in this culture. " I am in favor again of this type of insertion of the personal/political. One question I have here is-is it OK to do this a little historically, after all the culture of Lesage's Girlhood is quite removed from 1919.

Andrew asks a really smart question in his response: what should we make of the relationship between the intertitle and the imagery in "Broken Blossoms"?

I do quibble, however, with the suggestion that these attributes of the film are both "visual"; in fact, we engage imagistic and linguistic representations in very different ways.

This last argument is from Camille Paglia's "Sexual Personae." In this work, which is most plentiful in used book stores, Paglia locates an ancient tension between pagan (Egyptian) imagism and moralistic (Judeo-Christian) "word-worship."

I wonder if we can't bring Paglia's arguments to bear on Andrew's analysis. In particular, I would want to think about the connection she posits between the visual and the erotic, which seems to be of particular interest in light of the implicit (?) sexuality in Griffith's film.

Julia Lesage's feminist critique of Broken Blossoms, Artful Racism and Artful Rape in Broken Blossoms, is presumably written for "we women of all classes and races," and is at times a soul-searching examination of Lesage's (and presumably her female readers') falling prey to the seduction of the media and its "works which victimize women as one of their essential ingredients." At other times it is a straight-forward analysis of the film itself, a critique of masculine behavior under capitalism, and even briefly a biographical critique of D.W. Griffith as a male artist and member of the petite bourgeoisie "who feel themselves as individuals to be above economic and social constraints - sensitive outsiders morally superior to the bosses and brutes."

Lesage is most effective in her analysis of the film as a continuation of literary tropes in assigning three roles to masculine identity under a capitalist society (whether or not these three represent an exhaustive list or whether they are complex enough I think must be examined, but elsewhere): boss, worker, and outsider. As she notes, Griffith has conflated the racial and capitalist identity of "Chinky," resulting in a character who is far less a racial representative and much more "our old friend, the romantic hero." As she says, "when (Griffith) sets up his basic opposition of brute vs. sensitive man, he is working with a set of oppositions that have nothing to do with race." She makes a convincing argument that the traits Griffith assigns to the Asian man (sensitive lover of beauty, pursuer of unattainable women, drug addict, possessor of virtues) make him resonate more as the more familiar capitalist "outsider" than as the Buddhist "Yellow Man," although his superficial identity as such allows Griffith to both be anti-racist and racist at the same time.

However, I think this analysis breaks down a little when the Asian man (surprisingly) grabs a gun, seeks Burrows out, engages him, and kills him. At that point a cultural event takes place (Buddhist monk, motivated by love, becomes gangster, adopts violence) which Lesage chooses not to engage, preferring instead to interpret all actions in the realm of oversimplified, problematic masculinity. Lesage's argument shows some slippage when she draws generalized conclusions about the meaning of certain masculine behaviors to an assumed readership unified in its gendered response. While I agree with her that "the film is about sex roles as much as it is about race - in particular, it is about masculinity," she seems to be simultaneously arguing that Burrows and the Asian man are representative of opposing examples of distressing hyper-masculine behavior as well as normal capitalist masculine behavior. In this way she seems to be collapsing gender and economic stereotypes into a single problematic masculine engagement with society, split by Griffith into a binary construction. At this point she suddenly (and rather disdainfully) engages Griffith on a personal level, claiming that

"Griffith himself surely must have identified with" the Asian man (as romantic hero as well as outsider), allowing him to "conveniently" dump the bad masculine identity onto the lower class position of Burrows. She seems here to be positioning Griffith into making a socio-economic statement about himself in which he is portrayed in a heroic, artist/outsider light.

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don't know about the rest of you, but I'll play devil's advocate to her phallic construction and say that I think Lesage reads the phallic implications of the violence a bit too literally. I also think she projects a degree of interest towards the Asian man on the part of Lucy which I did not perceive. Instead I read Lucy as responding to the new physical environment in which she found herself; specifically to the incredible, exotic nature of the robe, the flowers, the doll, the materials, the textures. When Lucy's response is contrasted with the scene which depicted the paltry things she pulled from under the floor, and the yearning she had for the flower in the window, I think an event happened which Leplace again interpreted along gender, rather than cultural or socio-economic, lines. This interpretation fuels much of her phallic analysis of the confrontation between Burrows and the Asian man. Although I agree that the confrontation plays itself out across the body of the alabaster cockney lass," I believe the confrontation involves more of a culmination of cultural events than Lesage apparently does.

I think she is admirable for her willingness to investigate her own emotional and very personal response to the film, even allowing herself to be implicated by the system she is deriding. And, like M. Garabedian, I wondered about the lack of any sort of reading along contemporary audience levels. (I think it was M. Garabedian' sorry if not!)

I want to respond to several, rather diverse aspects of Lesage's article: her discussion of spectator pleasure, particularly women's pleasure in watching films which victimize women; her formal/aesthetic analysis of Lucy's "rape" by her father; and her acceptance of Griffith's strange infantilization of Lucy's character.

Lesage writes that, while watching Broken Blossoms, she became so caught up in the pathos of Lucy's story that she found herself having difficulty moving away from "'feeling,' to a more active, self-reflective response." Reading this before I actually saw the film, I thought that I too, would be swept away by Lucy's plight. Instead, I found myself repulsed. Unable to stomach the film's emotional pitch, I resorted to dryly analyzing the film's stereotypical characterizations. I'm wondering if this response is typical after nearly twenty years of feminist film criticism and eleven years after the publication of this article. I'm asking this because Lesage writes about this film from a particular historical vantage point and I think the pleasure she derives from the film inspired this article. My cynicism would inspire no such response.

On another note, but still in regards to pleasure. The few moments I took great interest in were the scenes in which the Chinese man dotes on Lucy in his apartment. Lesage categorizes this interaction as "safe" for viewers because the Chinese man's identity is coded as that of a traditional romantic hero. Nevertheless, I think part of the pleasure of this scene is the thrill of erotic transgression, which is built primarily around the anticipation of miscegenation. It remains safe because characters stick to their racial boundaries. So, viewers can have their little erotic cake and eat it too.

Lesage meticulously analyzes Lucy's beatings at the hands of Burrows, categorizing them as "rape." She notices that Burrows repeatedly holds his phallus-like whip at "penis height," concluding that this unconscious action signifies sexual penetration. I agree that these scenes are creepily incestuous, but I'm wondering if there is another way to get at these undertones. She seems to walk the line between formal analysis and psychoanalytic theory in such a way that leaves me unconvinced. I'd argue that the extreme way in which Burrows and Lucy are coded as dominant and submissive and Burrows' complete physical mastery over Lucy--allowing him to do whatever he pleases with her body-- (including rape) are enough to draw out this kind of analogy.

Finally, Lesage seems to slip back and forth between thinking about Lucy as a young woman and thinking about her as a child. For example, she states " the film leads us all to participate in 'her seduction by the Chinese man, the seduction in fact of a child who has just been given her first doll." I find Lucy's characterization problematic because at fifteen, she is on the verge of womanhood (my great-grandmother was married at seventeen), yet Griffith is bent on portraying her as a child. Lesage rightfully states that the doll codes Lucy as the venerated white virgin. Moreover, Griffith employs it to play on the sympathy of his viewers making her relationship with her father more horrific and the interaction with the Chinese man even more transgressive than if she had been thought of as a "young woman." This makes me think that Lucy operates as more than a marker for male identities, but also demonstrates which women are worth our sympathies in Griffith's world.